

**SETTIMANA CONCLUSIVA DELL'ANNO CENTENARIO  
DEL PONTIFICIO ISTITUTO BIBLICO  
[3-8 maggio 2010]**

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**THE WORD OF GOD AND THEOLOGY:  
WHERE DO WE STAND AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?**

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At times we exegetes are so caught up in the details of our work, that as we sit at our desks it is difficult for us to look up and ask, "Where do we stand?" We inevitably take a philosophical, theological and spiritual stand, especially when we sit and work. The stand we take is deeply shaped by our academic and spiritual environment, by the structures of plausibility that are proposed to us by persons we respect, especially by those who judge our work, who decide whether to publish it and who review it to determine our academic standing and career. We react in various ways to these outside influences, often unconsciously, sometimes consciously and actively: with anxiety, anger and disagreement; with confusion and uncertainty; or with joy, exhilaration and agreement.

The purpose of my talk is to reflect with you about where we stand so that we can help each other be more aware of the influences and more deliberate and careful in our reactions to them. I will argue that a de-personalized manner of scholarship tends to impose itself on us from the so-called "hard sciences," such as physics, chemistry and biology. While it is good for us to strive for the rational objectivity exemplified by the hard sciences, we should not let them impose a depersonalized form on our work on the texts. To allow such an imposition would deprive us of what is dearest to us personally, namely, the encounter with Christ and its transformative power. It would thereby threaten the usefulness of our work for the community of faith, of which we are parts.

Since the time of my studies at the Biblicum, the early eighties, almost thirty years ago, the academic world has become fragmented at an exponential rate. While classical historical criticism patterned after the hard sciences dominated most programs of Scripture scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century, this form of criticism has been replaced in many places by sociological post-modern approaches, such as deconstruction, of which Nietzsche was one of the first great masters. According to deconstructionism, the impression of objectivity and intelligibility created by the scientific method is a façade behind which power interests are at work.

Nevertheless, if one asks, What is the single most influential cultural force of our age? it is still true to answer, The hard sciences, especially particle physics, which has occupied the *de facto* place of metaphysics for a long time, beginning with Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and culminating in the astonishing success of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis* of 1687.

A well-known book by Michael Hart that ranks the 100 most influential human beings of history has the following six at the top of the list: Muhammad, Newton, Jesus,

Buddha, Confucius, and St. Paul.<sup>1</sup> It is a group of religious leaders. Newton is the only exception, and he yields first place only to Muhammad. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the American Declaration of Independence, ranks Newton third, but the first one on his list is Francis Bacon, who was the first one to work out the overall program of the science Newton perfected.

Bacon, Locke, and Newton...I consider them as the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, and as having laid the foundation of those superstructures which have been raised in the Physical and Moral sciences.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to imagine the excitement which Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* stirred up immediately after they were published. Halley's *Ode to Newton* gives some taste of the intoxicated mood.

...But now, behold,  
Admitted to the banquets of the gods,  
We contemplate the politics of heaven;  
And spelling out the secrets of the earth,  
Discern the changeless order of the world  
And all the eons of its history...  
Nearer the gods no mortal may approach.

One begins to appreciate the vast hope Halley placed in Newton when one asks how Newton allows one to grasp "all the eons of the world's *history*." Halley seems to suppose that we will someday grasp the position of all atoms, and thus be able to calculate on the basis of Newton's theorems the position of all atoms in the past and future. Mathematical physics will then replace the study of history. It supplies the most divine sapiential vision attainable by human beings. It will exhaustively explain what happened in the lives of all the men in Jefferson's and Hart's lists. They really need to move Newton to the top of the list. The influence of Newton was vast. Charles Darwin wanted to be the Newton of biology, Sigmund Freud the Newton of the soul. The list can go on and on.

What Halley does not draw out is the effect of his hope on human life as a whole. Once mathematical physics truly works out its divine sapiential vision in all detail and explains all events by the necessary laws of bodily motion, it eliminates every other point of view and every reality that, until then, still appeared irreducible to matter and motion. Human choices and emotions will be exhaustively explained by this movement of particles. The "banquets of the gods" and being "nearer to the gods" will turn out to be mere epiphenomena or emerging qualities of matter and movement. The universe turns out, in the end, to be without life, goodness and beauty. Its only real characteristics are extension, movement, force, etc. All of them are purely objective. They involve the person only as the one who measures and calculates.

What goes on in the person makes no difference to science, it appears. The person is the mere operator of the measuring instruments. Of course, the person is also the

<sup>1</sup> See Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: Citadel Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Trumbull, February 15, 1789. Julian Parks Boyd, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 14.561. For a facsimile of Jefferson's letter, see [www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm033.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm033.html)

one who thinks through the hypothesis and makes the mathematical calculations, but personal desires, loves, and commitments make no difference. They should be kept out of the process as much as possible. The famous distinction between facts and values, which is widely accepted in our culture, expresses this detachment of the person. Hard science studies only facts. It is value free. Values are part of human life, but they say more about the person who has them than about objective reality. Scientific research requires that we keep our values to ourselves as personal choices. They should have no impact on our work.

Our personal religious faith in particular, does not count when we do objective scientific research. The story of the first astronaut, the Russian Yuriy Gagarin, is famous. When he reached outer space, which was a great triumph of science, he is reported to have said that he did not see any God up there. The complete transcript made of the exchanges between Soviet ground control and Gagarin shows that Gagarin did not actually say these words. Newly declassified documents show that it was Nikita Khrushchev who said them during a session of the Politburo, in a discussion about how to use Gagarin's space flight for anti-religious propaganda. "Gagarin flew into space, but didn't see any God there." It was, of course, effective propaganda to transfer these words from Khrushchev's lips to the lips of the astronaut himself.<sup>3</sup> Still, it is true that the hard sciences do not consider God. They measure the objective phenomena and come up with a mathematical hypothesis that accounts for the results of experiments.

The person with its deepest longings and commitments seems to remain outside scientific research. The Austrian Erwin Schrödinger, who won the Nobel Prize for his work in quantum mechanics, has powerfully expressed this impersonal character of science.

I actually do cut out my mind when I construct the real world around me. And I am not aware of this cutting out. And then I am very astonished that the scientific picture of the world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously. So in brief, we do not belong to this material world that science constructs for us. We are not in it, we are outside.<sup>4</sup>

Given the dominance of natural science in our culture, it would be surprising if this ideal of objectivity and of the detachment of the person did not deeply affect us exegetes as we attempt to justify our own work as scientifically responsible, reliable and rational. There is great pressure for us to justify our place in the modern university and academic discourse and what better way of doing so than by conforming ourselves to the canons of the hard sciences. Physics and chemistry and the technology deriving from them have for this reason become the prime analogates or exemplars of much of biblical hermeneutics in its classical historical-critical form, even if they are not explicitly acknowledged as being such.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/orthodoxy/?act=interview&div=73&domain=1> which contains the testimony on this matter by Gagarin's close friend Valentin Petrov.

<sup>4</sup> Erwin Schrödinger, *Nature and the Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) 93-4.

Since the hard sciences have been on the whole so sensationally successful (witness the technologies deriving from them, without which the contemporary world could not function), no wonder they are respected so much. Once again there is something right about following the hard sciences as the prime analogate or exemplar. We do want to get to objective facts, wherever we can. We use computer statistics of the use of words in a body of texts. The numbers need to be objectively correct. It is clearly right that as exegetes we accept the challenge to emulate the intellectual integrity and respect for evidence of the hard sciences.

For science, the only authority are the instruments that measure the phenomena and the process of reasoning that connects the phenomena with a mathematical hypothesis that explains them by certain laws of nature. To accept definite views from an authoritative religious body, from bishops or the Pope, is what people did in the Middle Ages. The case of Galileo shows that such authority does violence to science.

Wikipedia, which is always a good place to access popular opinions, has this to say in its article about religious faith.

Faith is merely belief without evidence; a process of active non-thinking. A practice which only degrades our understanding of the natural world by allowing anyone to make a claim about reality that is based solely off of their personal thoughts, and possibly distorted perceptions, that does not require testing against nature, has no ability to make reliable and consistent predictions, and is not subject to peer review.<sup>5</sup>

In this paragraph, Wikipedia summarizes the position of Richard Dawkins, who was Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science in the University of Oxford from 1995 to 2008. Let us hear a passage from Dawkins himself.

Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.

Faith, being belief that isn't based on evidence, is the principal vice of any religion. And who, looking at Northern Ireland or the Middle East, can be confident that the brain virus of faith is not exceedingly dangerous? ...

Given the dangers of faith—and considering the accomplishments of reason and observation in the activity called science—I find it ironic that, whenever I lecture publicly, there always seems to be someone who comes forward and says, "Of course, your science is just a religion like ours. Fundamentally, science just comes down to faith, doesn't it?"

Well, science is not religion and it doesn't just come down to faith. Although it has many of religion's virtues, it has none of its vices. Science is based upon verifiable evidence.

Religious faith not only lacks evidence, its independence from evidence is its pride and joy, shouted from the rooftops. Why else would Christians wax critical of doubting Thomas? The other apostles are held up to us as exemplars of virtue because faith was enough for them. Doubting Thomas, on the other hand, required evidence. Perhaps he should be the patron saint of scientists...

If you have a belief that is based solely on faith, I can't examine your reasons. You can retreat behind the private wall of faith where I can't reach you...

Science, then, is free of the main vice of religion, which is faith.<sup>6</sup>

Let us examine this view a little. It glorifies the hard sciences at the expense of faith. We feel this pressure very often in our work.

Dawkins leaves out an important distinction. We need to distinguish two different senses of the word "faith." "To believe, to have faith" can mean forming an opinion on the basis of insufficient evidence. I believe that my wife is right now at her desk working on her dissertation about evolution. I am not sure about it. At this time of

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia, article "Faith."

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thehumanist.org/humanist/articles/dawkins.html> Richard Dawkins, "Is Science a Religion?"

the day she usually does work on it, but she may have gotten up to have a cup of tea and some chocolate. If I were at home with her right now, I would have the evidence. This is the only sense of "faith" Dawkins speaks about.

We also use the word "faith" in another sense. Suppose I am at home and my wife and I are taking a break from working to have some tea and chocolate. I open the kitchen drawer to take out the chocolate, but there is none. I ask my wife, "Where is the chocolate, dearest?" She answers, "Oh, we finished it yesterday, but I got a new supply. It is in a bag right over there." When she says this, I don't hesitate to answer, "Ah, now I know, thanks." I say, "I know," even though I only believe. I have faith in her word of testimony, faith without any evidence. Once I pick up the bag, open it, and see the chocolate, I have the evidence and I no longer need my wife's testimony. I know in a fuller sense of the word "know" that leaves faith behind. Still, even my faith in her words is rightly called knowledge, because her testimony is completely trustworthy. Besides, I know that she wants some chocolate too.

Faith in this sense of reliance on testimony plays an important role in every area of human life. How do I know that Italy is a peninsula? I have not seen it from high up in space surrounded by water. I look at maps in an atlas. I accept the testimony of the people who made the map. I know by faith.

Such faith plays an important role in the hard sciences. Students who start studying chemistry, for example, have little knowledge of the science, but they believe their professor. "Ah, now I know that DNA has a double helix structure." The students have not conducted the experiments on which this truth is based. They accept the professor's testimony on faith.

The situation of the professor of chemistry may seem very different. She knows chemistry. She has conducted many experiments. How many? Let's be generous and give her 40 years of experiments, one successful experiment for each day, which comes to 14,600 experiments. I know this number is much too high, but now consider how many experiments all chemists have conducted in building up the hard science of chemistry over the last two hundred years? I am not sure, but it must be millions. 14,600 experiments are at any rate less than 1% of the sum total of experiments. Even our professor of chemistry must take more than 99% of chemistry on faith. In relation to her science as a whole, she is in a position not unlike that of her beginning students. Nevertheless, she can rightly say about herself that she knows chemistry.

Dawkins equates "scientific" with "rational" and "faith" with "irrational." Yet there are circumstances in which it is quite irrational to be scientific. While I get the chocolate out of the bag, my wife has made tea. I sit down with her at the table and raise the cup to my lips. Then suddenly I jump up and quickly leave the table. I get on my bicycle with the hot cup of tea balanced on one hand and rush to the chemical laboratory of my university, two minutes from our house. I know the laboratory director, Rachel. I ask Rachel to test the tea for poison, because I do not know scientifically whether my wife has put poison into it and it is not reasonable for me to believe anything without scientific proof. Only science is rational; faith is irrational. Rachel knows my wife. She will not think I am being rational. She will either think that I am drunk or that I spent too many hours on textual criticism of the Book of Job. She

knows that in these circumstances it is irrational to be scientific and rational to have faith.

The rationality of the hard sciences depends in large measure on such faith. When I was getting my Doctorate in New Testament at Harvard Divinity School after finishing the Licentiate at the Biblicum, there was a case of a graduate student who was finishing research at Harvard Medical school for his doctorate. Let's call him Steven. Steven was having personal problems and did not have the time and energy to do all the experiments. So he simply invented data and put them into the laboratory report. It worked well for a while, but then someone else happened to do some of the same experiments. Steven's professors found out that his numbers were wrong. They investigated him and he had to admit that he had not done the experiments. The punishment was extremely harsh. He was dismissed from Harvard and no other university would accept him as a graduate student. Steven's academic career was finished.

The harshness of the punishment underlines the importance of faith for the hard sciences. The rationality of the hard sciences depends on the reliability of the witnesses who contribute to building up its fabric of faith. Since the only way scientists can possess their hard science is by faith, since they possess more than 99 percent of their science only by faith and only a very small part by their own experiments, preserving the rationality of that faith by ensuring the reliability of the witnesses is absolutely vital. Let us go back to Dawkins.

Faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate. Faith, being belief that isn't based on evidence, is the principal vice of any religion... Science, then, is free of the main vice of religion, which is faith.

If Dawkins were right, there could be no science. The patron saint of science could not be Thomas in the way Dawkins understands Thomas. Of course, Ignace de la Potterie would correct Dawkins's reading of the passage. If no scientist believed what he or she did not actually see in an experiment, science would disappear. The problem with Dawkins is that he completely forgets about faith in reliable testimony. The key thing in such faith is whom we believe and on the basis of what qualities.

Whom do we believe as Christians? We believe Jesus. We trust in his words and in his actions. We do this because we think he is trustworthy. We think he is so trustworthy that when we believe him we can say we know. Our faith is eminently rational knowledge.

Of course, being able to repeat and verify a chemical experiment is important for saying "we know," even when we did not actually conduct the experiment and cannot possibly reproduce them all. We don't have this ability of reproducing the direct experience in the case of Christ, the eternal Word. One of Jesus' key logia, the Johannine thunderbolt in the Synoptic gospels, says it clearly. "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27).

What sort of witness is Jesus? What does he know and how does he know it? If what he says in this Johannine thunderbolt is true, then he is the surest and most illuminating witness. The acceptance of his word in faith deserves to be called knowledge in the highest degree, much more so than the knowledge gained in the hard sciences on the basis of human faith in human testimony.

In sum, scientific knowledge in the hard sciences is in large measure a human faith and Christian faith is in large measure a mode of knowledge superior to that gained in the hard sciences. One of the Deutero-Paulines, accurately reflecting Paul at this point, says, "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed" (2 Tim 1:12). From Jesus, the testimony passed on through his disciples. At the end of the Gospel of John the editor of the text adds, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24).

Of course, much sharp scholarly ingenuity has been and is being invested in cutting down the reliability of this testimony. The arguments can be summarized by what the director of a film about Jesus said with disarming simplicity in an interview in the Austrian press some years ago. "I first throw out everything in the Gospels that science tells me cannot happen in this universe. Then I try to make sense of the rest." One of the things that science told him cannot happen in this universe is a miracle. The gospel narratives are full of miracles. The film-maker's principle takes the electrical switch that controls the historicity of the Gospels and turns it to the "off" position. Bultmann used the same switch. Of course, much careful work needs to be done to reach a nuanced judgment about historicity, but in comparison with what the hard sciences tell us about miracles, all those nuances are as nothing. The great Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas, a student of Heidegger, followed Heidegger from Göttingen to the university of Marburg. They both attended Bultmann's seminar on the Gospel of John. Jonas continued to work with Bultmann. Later in life he commented wisely on his revered friend and teacher.

The question is permitted whether Bultmann, totally conceding the modern axiom of immanence, has not given more to modern science than is its due. This seems to be the case, for instance, when he writes, "Modern science at any rate does not believe that the course of nature can be breached by supernatural forces" and he means to say that it believes that this cannot occur. But on such a "can" and "cannot" science does not pronounce... Bultmann is, of course, right that *subjectively* this very faith, i.e., the science-inspired *idea* of a natural law that brooks no exception, is the dominant faith of "modern man" *including* the theologian (less, perhaps, lately the scientist himself)... Bultmann shared with Kant an exaggerated conception of the tightness and rigidity of worldly causality.<sup>7</sup>

In our age we often speak about faith as a leap. The idea is that reason only gets you so far and then, without reason, you jump into the dark abyss, and that is faith. If jumping means leaving reason behind, then the leap of faith is a profoundly false image of faith. It is not a leap for me to believe my wife when she says where the chocolate is. It is rational. In a similar way, though on a much deeper level, it is rational to believe Jesus. For the apostles it was not a leap, but a rational step to stay with Jesus and believe his words. "Do you also want to leave?" to which Peter answers, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life" (John 6:68). Whether these are the *ipsissima verba Petri* or not, they are certainly my *ipsissima verba*. They express why I do not leave. In the end, the reason for our faith is this quality of the glory of the eternal life of the Trinity expressed in the Johannine concept of life. "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us and we have seen his glory,

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Jonas, "Is Faith Still Possible Today? Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on Philosophical Aspects of his Work," *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982), 1-23; here 9-10, 14. See Waldstein, *Foundations of Bultmann's Work*, 139.

the glory as of the only-begotten from the Father full of gift and truth" (John 1:14). The final glory, the definitive beauty flashes up in the person of Jesus.

The perception of this glory is not possible without another profound participation of the person in the process of knowing, namely, its participation by love. Thomas Aquinas argues that wisdom in theology, that is, the knowledge which does not give us mere fragments, but an architectonic vision of the whole, comes from two main sources. The first is a thorough use of the mind that considers all the main arguments objectively without subjective prejudice. This is an essential aspect of wisdom. It is right to take the ethos of the hard sciences as an exemplar in this regard. The second main source of theological wisdom, Thomas says, is love. Love, he argues, assimilates us to what we love. He calls this assimilation connaturality, being of the same nature as what we love, sharing in its nature from within.

An example he gives is wisdom about the right relation between men and women. One way to gain such wisdom is to think carefully about that relation and weigh its various aspects. In that way one can arrive at an understanding of the virtue that governs sexual relations. Another way to gain wisdom about that virtue is to have the virtue and to love it intensely. When one loves it intensely, one is able to judge wisely what does and what does not belong to it. It is similar in the case of theology, Thomas goes on to argue.

It belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to have right judgment about divine things through the inquiry of reason, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to have a right judgment about them according to a certain connaturality with them, as Dionysius says in Chapter 2 of *On the Divine Names*, "Hierotheus is complete in divine things not only by learning, but also by suffering divine things (*patiens divina*)."<sup>8</sup> Now this suffering with (*compassio*) or connaturality toward Divine things is the result of love, which unites us to God, according to 1 Cor. 6:17: "The one who is joined to the Lord, is one spirit [with him]."<sup>8</sup>

Let me conclude. Where do we stand and where are we going? We stand in the Modern Age, in which the hard sciences of nature have achieved a dominance that impresses its seal on everything else. These sciences tend to exclude the person from the scientific process, in order to achieve objectivity of measurement and verification by experiment. Yet, when one looks more exactly, the person is very much present. Science is impossible without persons who give reliable testimony. The knowledge it produces is more than 99 percent faith. We should not let the superficial consensus about excluding the person distort our work as exegetes. Faith is a thoroughly reasonable act that does not detract from good science. Its eyes are sharpened by love according to the old Latin proverb: "*Ubi amor, ibi oculus*. Where there is love, there is an eye, there is insight." That is where we can stand, in faith and love. We do not need to be afraid that we are doing violence to our exegetical science if this is where we stand. It opens the mind rather than closing it. It is therefore also where we are going.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2-2ae.45.2 c.